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Some Jewish Reflections on The Splendor of Truth

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Some Jewish Reflections on The Splendor of Truth

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JACK BEMPORAD

***Some Jewish Reflections on
The Splendor of Truth***

As a Jew and as a rabbi it is not for me to comment on the elements in this encyclical which are addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church in the context of the authoritative head of the church speaking to the faithful, which is after all what an encyclical is. However Pope John Paul's encyclical deals with themes of utmost concern to all of us. It confronts many of the questions of ethics and morality that address the ethical malaise pervading our contemporary society and is a profound analysis and evaluation of modernity offering a significant and comprehensive alternative. As such it not only concerns the faithful among the Catholic Church but also all individuals concerned with ethical questions. It addresses those confused about the place of ethics in their lives.

Because it is an encyclical, it is written in a form that appeals to both Scripture and Catholic tradition as well as to the natural law doctrine prevalent in Catholic teaching. It is not written as a philosophical treatise establishing its theses and offering rational arguments for them as well as critically analyzing and refuting those doctrines it finds distasteful and alien. Rather it is in the form of a lesson employing a homiletic style which presents an authoritative teaching for those who, themselves sincerely concerned with moral questions, must take seriously the moral disquiet of our time and strive to deal with it. The lessons it depicts and the doctrines it sets forth are meant as a guide to all individuals who are concerned with what makes for true satisfaction and an abiding good for human beings and for society.

My approach to *The Splendor of Truth* will be primarily from a Jewish and to a lesser degree from a philosophical perspective. It is my hope to show that there is much in *The Splendor of Truth* that is consistent with Jewish teaching and that in many ways Judaism

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and Catholicism stand on common ground in confronting what may loosely be termed modernist trends. That many of the trends of modernism and post-modernism should be of concern to all individuals concerned about such values as trust, personal integrity, truthfulness, and justice can be seen from the statement of a rather mild academician, John Findlay, who in a perceptive essay entitled "The Systematic Unity of Value" states:

How do we counter the determined relativist, the true Nietzschean who is now becoming so abundant, or, worse still, the proponent and advocate of values of the abyss, of the utterly abominable and repugnant: the values attributed to meaningless arbitrariness occurring on a sorrowful background of equal meaninglessness, the values of surrender to a dark divinity who first demands the sacrifice of one's reason and one's morals, the values of gratuitous disturbance of social patterns which tends only to further disturbance, the value attached to cruelty and absurdity loved and cherished for their own sake? Our age has exceeded all previous ages in the richness of its perversions, and without some principle that can sort the valid from the deviant forms, it will not be possible to carry our value-constitution very far.¹

Perhaps it may be helpful to indicate what this common ground which Judaism and Christianity share consists of. First and foremost, we believe that all human beings are made in the divine image (Genesis 1:26; cf. Psalms 8:5) and hence have an intrinsic dignity and sacredness that must be respected and enhanced through personal dedication and communal and social action.

Second, we agree that we are called upon to realize the good for ourselves and others so as to bring out the best in ourselves and others, and that that good can best be achieved through the love of God and our fellow human beings. Such love entails taking upon ourselves the obligations uniquely and decisively given to us as Jews and Christians and to all human beings in Prophetic teachings.

The Jewish tradition interprets Scripture, the Hebrew Bible, in the light of Rabbinic traditions and teachings. *The Splendor of Truth* quite appropriately presents its teaching through its heritage, which consists of the Hebrew Bible, Catholic Scriptures, Catholic tradition, and the teachings of the Magisterium.

Jewish tradition holds the love of God and the love of one's fellow human beings as central. It sees the highest good as living a life in proper relationship to God, which consists of loving and knowing God, walking in his ways, and manifesting his attributes. The more one beholds or hearkens to the divine, the more the individual gains a real part in the being of what is known. The classic texts illustrating this teaching can be found in the book of Leviticus, where it states "you shall become holy for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2), and in the Book of Exodus, wherein the ways God is to be imitated are compassion, graciousness, patience, abundant steadfast love, and truth (Exodus 34:6). The alternative is also true. Jeremiah states, "They went after useless things and became useless" (Jeremiah 2:5), and Hosea states, "They went after detestable things and became detestable" (Hosea 9:10). We take on the character of what we worship and pursue, both the holy and profane.

As the Prophets continually stress, the knowledge of God comes primarily through ethical living. Leo Baeck has stated that "to know God and to do right have thus become synonymous in prophetic speech."² Jeremiah states "He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him. Is not this to know me? saith the Lord" (Jeremiah 22:15ff). Also pertinent is Jeremiah's marvelous delineation of what man should glory in, quoted by Maimonides as the crowning chapter of his *Guide to the Perplexed*: "Thus saith the Lord, let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches, but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understand and knoweth me that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on the earth" (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

On the other hand, not to know the Lord is to be insensitive to justice, righteousness, and truth. Hosea states that "there is no truth, no mercy, no knowledge of God in the land" (Hosea 4:1);

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and Jeremiah says, "For they proceed from evil to evil and they know not me, saith the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:5).

The Prophet Micah calls to us to "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly" with God (Micah 6:6) and Deuteronomy sets before us the choice between life and death. God tells Israel that what is set before them is life and death, blessing and curse, "therefore choose life that you and your children may live" (Deuteronomy 30:29). True joy and spiritual fulfillment come from knowing and serving God. This is best achieved through the responsible commitment to our fellow human beings fully respecting the divine image indwelling within them.

Third, both traditions firmly believe that the truths of our respective religious traditions are truths that can be arrived at through one's rational faculties as well as revelation, and that both the Rabbinic and philosophical traditions' teaching on this can be summarized by Halevi's statement "God forbid that we should believe anything contrary to reason."³ Unfortunately, today misology is rampant and there is a sustained attack on reason and rationality.

Perhaps the most distressing development affecting contemporary thought has to do with its relativizing of the nature and function of reason. I cannot devote too much space to this issue, but it is central to *The Splendor of Truth* and to present-day Jewish concerns. There is no point discussing objective values and intrinsic goods and evils if reason is merely an arbitrary use of language for purposes of power. This doctrine, which some have traced to Nietzsche, can be stated as follows: The law of contradiction may be true of thought, but there is no reason to believe that it is true of things. Philosophers in this tradition argue that reason is a "project" or a "venture" or a "language game," and as such is strictly arbitrary and relative. It seems to me that all such arguments are shipwrecked on the shoals of making a claim that means something that is identifiable and statable, and the very statement of it presupposes the very theses it wishes to negate.⁴

Finally, both traditions are agreed on the question of autonomy. Both reject the overvaluing of autonomy so that it becomes the highest good, independent and separate from what autonomy chooses. Is it autonomy for autonomy's sake or is it autonomy for the sake of the good? Autonomy for God's sake? Yes, it is part of

respect for persons to respect their individuality and their decision-making and their right to choose, but this in no sense negates that what we choose must be evaluated independently of the act of choice itself. For example, in the Bible, true freedom is not limited to the Exodus from Egypt, wherein one is no longer restrained physically or emotionally and thus has the power to do as one wills, but was only achieved at Sinai, when the teaching was given to educate the children of Israel on what is the good they should use their freedom to achieve.

To argue that one is free to do as one wishes as long as we do not hurt anyone else or as long as the other party consents to our behavior seems to be a highly questionable position, since it denies that we have a positive responsibility to promote the good of others and not simply avoid doing them harm. It appears to me that we have as much of a responsibility, in the words of E.F. Carritt, "to help a man out of a hole as not to shoulder him callously into it; to assist him in escaping from wrongful imprisonment or economic slavery as not to oppress him."⁵

Unfortunately, the view that claims that we can do what we want as long as we do not hurt others or if others consent to our acts, ends up more often in diminishing the "dignity" and "sanctity" of other individuals, since they are not perceived as persons in the full and proper sense. So when it comes to relating to them we tend to use them for our own ends rather than treating them as ends in themselves.

This *laissez faire* attitude not only fails to touch the issue of the rightness or wrongness of our choice as it affects others but also leaves out the important element that while we are free to act, free to choose, we are not free from the consequences of our acts, of our choices — and these consequences not only affect others, but, equally important, the consequences affect our future selves, the person we become.

The significant fact here is that what we do determines the type of people we become and the traits of character we possess. So as it has often been observed, the key question is not what would most satisfy myself but what kind of a self do I most want to become. What I do builds character and it develops habits of mind and heart and action which will affect how I live my life.

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With respect to the importance of character and the formation of character, in a recent report investigating cheating at the U.S. Naval Academy, Richard Armitage, who headed the inquiry, said that he “found that character development and honor were relatively on the back burner in the Navy’s mind and at the [Naval] Academy for a long period.” Commenting on this situation, Prof. Dennis McCabe of Rutgers University said that the excuse people give is that everybody cheats, but even more significant to my mind is that he noticed that the emphasis is “not on what you’ve learned or what kind of person you are anymore, but what kind of score you got on the standardized tests or what your grade point average is.”⁶

There is a fundamental difference between a technological way of dealing with problems, which is an application of a technological mentality, and a religious moral way, which appeals to an individual’s conscience and awareness of the right way to act. Unfortunately, technological solutions have increased our power to act and thus have made the issue of autonomy central in our day. Technological expectations discourage educational appeals to our rationality and our capacity to be in control of our lives and our actions.

What made me think of this is a new ad campaign which shows two youths kissing passionately and beginning to undress. The woman asks the man if he remembered the condom. He says that he forgot it, so she says forget it, no sex. The implication is that the condom is the technological magic bullet that will keep one safe and invulnerable, and therefore we are able to do whatever we want with impunity. Nothing is said about the relationship. Is it a married relationship? Is it a tender loving relationship? The issue is not an issue of right and wrong, but of technology. If you have the condom then all is permissible. The ad impresses me as a form of pornography, and as my teacher, Edward Ballard has, I think, correctly defined it, pornography ends up as always being a form of violence. He states,

I define it [violence] as treating a whole as if this whole were identical with one or some of its parts.
In particular, violence offered to a person consists

in behaving toward the person or self as if he were identical with some role or some special aspect of the self which is found to be interesting or which can be used. Thus the criminal who mugs a passerby is acting out of a partial view of the passerby, treating him as nothing more than an object which prevents access to the desired wallet. Pornography is a form of violence in that it ignores or finds valueless all aspects of a person except his sexual attributes. Similarly, the investigator who persists in maintaining an objective attitude towards persons in order to play a fate like role in studying them or manipulating them in the interests of his curiosity or the unlimited Progress of science and technology is treating them as if they were identical with one of their attributes. He is therefore doing them violence.⁷

This typifies exactly our distorted technological approach to everything. Medicine tells us we will find a cure, a medicine that will make up for our self-destructive behavior. This raises the whole issue of means and ends. Our generation has unfortunately suffered overwhelmingly because of this doctrine that the ends justify the means and that you cannot have an omelet without breaking eggs. But as Haim Greenberg convincingly demonstrated in dealing with questions of politics, ends and means in morality are analogous to form and content in art. Form in art is not merely technique; means in morality are not merely instruments: "the content must be felt in the form. The means must contain the basic elements of the end."⁸

It seems to me that *The Splendor of Truth* raises the real issue of what our responsibilities are and what we should do to respect persons in the fullest and broadest context. The failure to treat persons as ends in themselves causes tremendous havoc and tragic pain and destruction of human life: not just sex and money scandals, but individuals betrayed, careers ruined, and souls sullied. The setting forth of intrinsic goods and evils offers a standard by

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which present as well as past and future acts can be evaluated. Thus, *The Splendor of Truth* is not just a theoretical but an eminently practical teaching which can help us reflect on what we do and how it affects persons in the broadest sense of that term. Respect for persons becomes the central focus and here this is not because persons are high-grade animals but because they are recognized as beings made in the image of God and thus have a sanctity and dignity that cannot be ignored, taken for granted, or abused.

It is within the context of respect for persons that the pursuit of pleasure has to be understood. Pleasure is an important element in life. We all seek satisfaction and joy. We should note, though, first, that there is a difference between pleasure and joy. Second, pleasure itself must be analyzed and understood. There are pleasures that leave us pretty much the way we were before we satisfied them. There are pleasures that make us worse by habituating us to actions that in the long run and if done repeatedly make us worse. For example, pleasures that come from smoking and drinking and indulgence in destructive pleasures habituate us to actions that ultimately make us worse. These actions destroy our health, make us obsessed with needs that do not help but rather hurt us, and then we are forced to do what we can to correct them. Many pleasures come from hurting others, like wanting to lord over others or indulging our ego so as to get pleasure from wielding power over others, humiliating them or feeling good not by doing anything worthwhile but by pushing someone down.

Here there is a connection between the Rabbinic teaching of the evil and good inclination and the Christian doctrine of Original Sin. There are of course obvious differences between these two views, but they both recognize the need to overcome that in us which is egotistical and which is proud and vain and wants to feel good by falsehood and pretense rather than truth and humility. Both religions recognize that the first step in religious life is to recognize one's place in the scheme of things and that it takes effort and courage and will power to overcome whatever in oneself is egotistical and vain. In this sense the Rabbinic teaching here is to realize the *yetzer Ha Tov*, which is the formative power to do good, to realize and fulfill our true self, and the first step in this is to seek the truth

about ourselves. In contrast the *yetzer Ha Ra*, the formative power for evil, is to actualize the false self which can be recognized as that part of us that seeks to be praised and have power and importance not from any positive thing we have done but simply by putting others down. Unless we can overpower our evil inclination it is impossible to have genuine respect for persons, since we simply are incapable of seeing other persons in themselves but rather only as extensions of ourselves.

But there are also pleasures that neither leave us where we are nor make us worse but which fulfill the best in us and give us not really just pleasure but what can be expressed as joy. It is this latter pursuit that puts us in touch with our creativity that comes from realizing our souls and not our ego. Such soul-realization puts us in control of our lives and avoids the predicament of having life run us. It is this which the religious life tries to present to us so as to fulfill the best in each of us and relate to others so as to fulfill the best in them.

In conclusion, I am very sympathetic to the Pope's closing comments in *The Splendor of Truth* dealing with martyrdom. Years before he was interned in Theresienstadt the extermination camp, Leo Baeck wrote of religious optimism:

it is the optimism that is contained in the decision for God, the optimism that becomes the commandment and therefore sometimes demands heroism and martyrdom. It is also the capacity, and the determination to make the great resistance, to be zealous and earnest, to do and dare to the end.⁹

For the Jewish people throughout the ages, and especially in this darkest of centuries, martyrdom has been an all-too-pervading reality for this people of martyrs, as my teacher Hans Jonas has so eloquently pictured "the gassed children of Auschwitz" dying *al kiddush hashem*, sanctifying the name of God. This is not a pious utterance, but a reality according to the "flesh" (see Isaiah 58:7), which, as the Pope has fittingly described, is a cry, a howling scream of warning to the world. If the teachings of *The Splendor of Truth* are to be heeded, then its intrinsic values and the pursuit of

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the dignity of persons, especially the most vulnerable and helpless individuals, cannot be forsaken or neglected, since we must embrace martyrdom ourselves rather than let the victors again be martyred. So that the image of God will not again be defaced, we must act in such a way that never again will God repent that he created us because of what we have done and not through our action or inaction must we ever cause God to grieve in his heart that he created us.

Notes

¹John Findlay, *Ascent to the Absolute: Metaphysical Papers and Lectures* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), p. 214.

²Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism*, trans. Victor Grubweiser and Leonard Pearl (New York: Macmillan, 1936), p. 37.

³Yehuda Halevi, *Kuzari* (New York: Schocken, 1966).

⁴On this issue, see especially the works of Brand Blanshard, particularly *Reason and Analysis* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1962) and *Reason and Goodness* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), and also Van Harvey's essay "Nietzsche and the Kantian Paradigm of Faith," in *Witness and Existence: Essays in Honor of Schubert M. Ogden*, ed. Philip E. Devenish and George L. Goodwin (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁵E.F. Carrith, *The Theory of Morals* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1930), pp. 101-02.

⁶Quoted in *Bergen Record*, January 16, 1994, Editorial page.

⁷Edward Goodwin Ballard, *Man and Technology: Toward the Measurement of a Culture* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1978), p. 229.

⁸Haim Greenberg, *Inner Eye* (New York: Jewish Frontier Publishing Association, 1953), I, p. 256.

⁹Leo Baeck, *God and Man in Judaism* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1958), p. 8.